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ABSTRACT

In the last decade many people have questioned the long-range effectiveness of literacy education in America. The response to this discussion about the "literacy crisis" has been the growth of three commonly held generalizations: (1) that in previous eras, Americans enjoyed remarkable levels of literacy; (2) that the role of print has been lessened or even negated since television and radio replaced it as the primary source of information for many Americans; and (3) that literacy standards would be higher if there had been, historically, more legislative control over school personnel and curriculum. Public concern about basic knowledge and literacy skills has proved valid, but Americans have actually been reading and writing more than ever before. Ninety-four percent of Americans reported that they read either a newspaper or news magazine, and one-third said that they read at least one book every six months. Although it cannot be said that Americans have lately emerged as less literate than before, society's demand for high level literacy has never been greater. Those individuals who wish only minimal literacy skills have not been able to find and keep employment, and if the nation's educational institutions are not meeting this challenge, then there is indeed a literacy crisis in America. (Fourteen references are included.) (AEW)

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AMERICAN READING FORUM, 1986

PROBLEMS COURT SESSION

LITERACY: The Myth and the Challenge

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

During the last ten years many people have questioned the long-range effectiveness of American education. Much of this discussion has focused on questions concerning pupils' abilities to read and write. Many critics, especially in the popular press, (Nunberg, 1981; Copperman, 1[illegible] have bemoaned the quality of literacy education in North America. The Associated Press published the booklet Johnny Still Can't Read (1976) written by Kathryn Diehl which refers to "the tragedy of the widespread epidemic of illiteracy among Americans." Articles in Newsweek, The New York Times, the Associated Press, and many popular books have reported great concern about illiteracy among Americans. Suhor (1984) states "the popular perception in America is that reading and writing in our society are declining." He further states:

> the popular perception is that reading and writing in our society are threatened by preoccupation with nonprint media.....People see a decline of literacy in utilitarian settings such as the world of work and the conduct of daily living; and they identify both the schools and general changes in society as causes.

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The response to this discussion about the "literacy crisis" has been the growth of three commonly held generalizations about literacy. The first generalization arises from the "gold old days" perception, whose advocates believe that during previous eras in our history, Americans were remarkably literate. A second generalization about literacy is that the role of print is being lessened or even negated as the electronic media provides an increasing amount of information and entertainment. A third generalization often expressed concerning literacy in America is that literacy standards can be improved by more legislative control over school personnel and curriculum.

As with many broad generalizations, these generalizations about literacy in North America contain both elements of accuracy and elements of distortion. The purpose of this Problems Court Session is to examine these generalizations. This examination is necessary in order to discover both the myth and the challenge in each of these ideas.

GENERALIZATION ONE: During previous eras in our history Americans were remarkably literate.

The advocates of this idea are quick to point out that the scores on general tests of academic aptitude are decreasing each year and that Americans read, write, and spell less well than ever before. However, the idea that the history of North America is a history of a citizenry with high level literacy skills is a distortion of the facts (Harste and Mikulecky, 1984.) In early America and throughout its Westward expansion, education often took a back seat to survival and earning a living. Children went to school when they could be excused from helping the family earn a living. Even as late as the year 1910, only eight per

cent of the 17-18 year old age group graduated from high school. Of this eight per cent, six per cent went on to college.

Thus the context of literacy for much of our history was a context of elitism. The majority of the people finished only a few years of primary education, while a few privileged persons received university or college training. In World War I, 55 per cent of the enlistees were classified as illiterate by the armed services. Even in World War II, 25 per cent of the enlistees were classed as illiterate.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 which tied the opportunity to work with education and literacy training is a very recent development. Part of the reason for this development was the need for reading required in many occupations. In 1790 only ten per cent of occupations required reading and writing, while in 1980, ninety per cent of occupations require reading and writing. High level literacy skills are essential for economic opportunity.

Americans do read and write more than ever before. Ninety-four per cent of Americans report that they read either a newspaper or news magazine, and one third of Americans report reading at least one book every six months (Sharon, 1973). During the 1982 recession, Publisher's Weekly reported that the book publishing industry was outperforming all other industries. Thus, it is a myth to say that Americans are less literate than ever before. However, the demands for high level literacy in the work place and at home are greater than they have ever been before. The need for a highly skilled work force has increased the minimal literacy standards necessary to find and keep a job. As factories and offices become more automated, workers must read highly technical materials, and they also need to be able to use this information in a variety of ways.

Those individuals who have only a minimal literacy level are not able to

attain and keep employment. It is true that the group of hard corp unemployable youth is rising because they do not have literacy skills sufficient for the job market. Thus, while in many ways, American is more literate than ever before, the necessity for increasing the level of literacy for the entire population has never been as crucial. Cardoza (1987) states: "While young American adults are more literate today than ever before, the gerater demands in an information society temper the good news." The literacy survey of the nation's 21-25 year olds conducted last year by the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that illiteracy is not a major problem. But the historical standards of literacy--completion of a fifth grade education--are now rejcted by experts. Functioning in the Information Age requires more and better information processing skills. Thus, the challenge of this generalization is clear. We need to find better ways to teach all of the population to read and to read to higher standards than ever before if we wish to keep a vital and productive labor force. Providing children with the necessary literacy skills to become economically independent is a major challenge to educators at all levels. If our educational institutions are not meeting this challenge, then indeed, there is a literacy crisis in America.

GENERALIZATION TWO: The role of print is being lessened or even negated as the electronic media provides an increasing amount of information and entertainment.

For nearly two decades, television and radio have replaced print as the primary source of information for many Americans. People spend more time watching television than in any other leisure activity; children spend more hours

watching television than adults; and they spend more hours watching television than they spend in school. The typical child sits in front of the television set about four hours a day, and children in lower socioeconomic families spend even greater amounts of time watching television. In either case the child spends more time with television than he or she spends talking to parents, playing with peers, attending school, or reading (Moody, 1980).

Although a strong argument could be made that the majority of childhood hours should be spent in isolated play, in playing with peers, or in interacting with parents; there is little evidence that the large amount of time spent watching television has caused a decline in literacy. In a study by Purves (1970), better readers watched more television than poorer readers. For some children television can open doors to more experiences. Certain television programs, such as Little House on the Prairie can and do spur an interest in reading books that have been introduced.

Marshal McLuhan (1960) has been one of the most influential speakers on the effect of television and other media on children's learning. He states: "Television habituates the mind to short takes, not to the continuity of thought required by reading.....Focusing and paying attention to print becomes an unnatural strain for the conditioned TV viewer."

It is certainly true that the electronic age has affected the world of print. It seems very clear that technology and the electronic media are not likely to make print literacy unnecessary. However, they have changed the print media and will continue to change some of the facets of literacy as we know it today.

Some of these ramifications are known, others are unknown. We know it is possible to print manuscripts and books rapidly. The quantity of information

which can be moved and printed is astounding. Small run publications are possible and cost efficient. In a matter of a few weeks books on major events can be produced and marketed. Never has it been possible to produce so many books so rapidly as is currently feasible. Small, narrow-audience magazines and journals are thriving. It is now possible to beam a message across the globe via satellite and beam it back to the point of origin in one seventieth of a second. Rapid communication is the rule rather than the exception. Already, the availability of long distance calling has greatly decreased the numbers of friendly letters written.

However, even though the new electronic technology will change some of our ideas about literacy, modern technology will cause more works to be read than not read. The Infomart Center in Dallas is designed to be a showplace for the new information age in the same way that the Crystal Palace in England was a showplace for the age of the industrial revolution. However even in this center, there is a great emphasis on print. The resource room and the library, which are the heart of the services Infomart provides, are filled with printed books. In fact, the Center guide spent much of the tour discussing the resource room and the library. Electronic technology is going to demand more of the reader rather than less. Most pieces of software have an accompanying manual of directions which makes high literacy demands on the user. Print literacy will not be replaced; however, the manner in which print is generated, stored, and presented will change.

Modern technology will also demand that we shift from a literate society to a multi-literate society. Radio, films, television, computers, and other electronic forms have changed the way people experience the world. Television in particular has reestablished a multi-sensory orientation to sensory organization.

The linear bias of print culture is being challenged by the multi-sensory electronic media. The challenge to educators is to find ways to help citizens adapt to a multi-literate society where both adults and children can use all avenues to access information and synthesize knowledge. Children of the electronic age need to be taught to use all available means for learning in a productive and efficient manner.

GENERALIZATION THREE: Literacy standards can be improved by more legislative control over school personnel and curriculum.

The popular perception behind this generalization is that stronger federal and state governmental control over school personnel and curriculum will result in better literacy education. The history of the United States is filled with legislative mandates to build and maintain schools. Harvard University was clearly founded by a legislative body in 1642. Legislation providing for grammar schools was begun with the Deluder Satan Act of 1647. This Act mandated that every township of fifty householders or more had to appoint a teacher within their town and every town of 100 householders or more had to set up a grammar school. High schools were similarly mandated with the Massachusetts law on high schools in 1827.

The familiar Land Grant Acts which gave states federal lands for educational use were carefully spelled out in a law passed in 1862. The first legislation mandating compulsory attendance was passed in Massachusetts in 1852. However, it was not until 1918 that all states had compulsory attendance laws. The upper age

limits ranged from 12 to 16. Yet in many states, students were allowed to leave school at earlier ages if they had completed a stipulated number of grades. and work permits could be obtained for special cases. The effect of these exemptions was that only four states in 1918 substantially required full time school attendance beyond fourteen years of age.

The next wave of school legislation began in 1958 as a result of the launching of the Russian space satellite. Most of the National Defense Education Act dealt with financial aids to the states as sponsors of educational programs. In 1964 the Economic Opportunity Act, and in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act mandated that financial aid be apportioned directly to local school districts. Another result of these acts was the call for participation by formal agencies in education. Thus, throughout the history of education, legislation has been used to provide adequate education for all. The result of much of the legislation in the sixties has been a growing control of local schools by both state and federal government.

In the current decade, when considerable public attention has been placed on the literacy levels of the population, a new type of legislation has been enacted by some states. This legislation focuses on minimal competency standards for all students and minimal competency requirements for teachers. This is a new focus in school legislation. While some of the Secondary Education acts specified mandatory curriculum areas, school legislation in American historically did not set specific achievement standards. It is the challenge of our age to determine the effect of this minimal competency legislation on the achievement levels of all children and minimal competency standards for teachers. Will an emphasis on minimal standards lead to a concentration of teachers and money on the students with problems with a neglect for students who are progressing well above minimal

standard levels? What effect will this emphasis have on the goals and objectives for education set in each district? Educators need to consider whether literacy education would be better served with a different legislative emphasis. In an era dominated by cries for going "back to the basics," "for minimal competencies," and for "survival skills," educators must reject simplistic solutions and declare a commitment to high level literacy standards. Legislation has always been a fundamental part of education in America. Careful scrutiny of the effect of minimal literacy standards on state and local policy needs to be done by reading educators.

SUMMARY

During the last ten years many people have questioned the long-range effectiveness of literacy education in America. The response to this discussion about the "literacy crisis" has been the growth of three commonly held generalizations about literacy. The first generalization arises from the "good old days" perception, whose advocates believe that during previous eras in our history, Americans were remarkably literate. A second generalization about literacy is that the role of print is being lessened or even negated as the electronic media provides an increasing amount of information and entertainment. A third generalization often expressed is that literacy standards can be improved by legislation which gives governmental control over school personnel and curriculum.

Public concern about basic knowledge and the basic literacy skills is valid. Society should continually seek out, define, and then provide for every person those elements of education that are essential to a productive and meaningful life. Simplistic solutions must be abandoned in favor of a commitment

to high level literacy standards. A strong challenge to reading educators is to examine these ideas currently stated in the popular press in order to make wise educational policy decisions. As stated by the authors of the Essentials of Education (1979):

> Educators should resist pressure to concentrate solely upon easy-to-teach, easy-to-test, bits of knowledge, and must go beyond short-term objectives of training for jobs or producing citizens who can perform routine task but cannot apply their knowledge of skills, cannot reason about their society, and cannot make informed judgments.

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